



PENNSYLVANIA STATE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

2421 North Front Street
Harrisburg, PA 17110-1110

(717) 364-1700 Phone

(717) 364-1705 Fax

Patrolling the Toughest Blocks in the State

WWW.PSCOA.ORG

John Eckenrode, President
jeckenrode@pscoa.org

Hank McNair, Executive Vice President
hmcnair@pscoa.org

Aaron King, Vice President
aking@pscoa.org

Mark Truskowski, Vice President
mtruskowski@pscoa.org

Justin Krommes, Secretary/Treasurer
jkrommes@pscoa.org

Testimony for Majority Policy Committee

Pennsylvania Senate

By John Eckenrode, President

Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association

June 11, 2024

Good morning, Chairman Laughlin and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address this committee on the workforce limitations that have created a staffing crisis in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

My name is John Eckenrode, and I'm the president of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association (PSCOA), representing our approximately 10,000 members who serve this commonwealth every day in some of the most dangerous work situations you'll find anywhere. As we often say, our members patrol the toughest blocks in the state.

After serving our nation in the United States Marines, I returned to Pennsylvania and became a corrections officer. For a quarter century, I've worked at state prisons in Cresson and Benner townships, reaching the rank of sergeant and serving as a member of the Corrections Emergency Response Team.

I have seen a lot in 25 years of service to this commonwealth. But the current staffing shortage we've faced since the onset of the 2020 pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge. We thought vacancies would ease with the pandemic.

In October 2021, our vacancies for corrections officers, sergeants and trainees stood at 556. But two and a half years later, in March of this year, our vacancies stood at 831 — a stunning increase of 67%.

Now, clearly, the pandemic subsided well before March of this year, but vacancies continue to rise because our department hasn't adjusted to having to compete more aggressively for personnel in a marketplace that has radically changed.

Bonuses, Salaries and Benefits

With vacancies impacting the public and private sectors, many are having to incorporate signing bonuses and higher beginning wages just to get people in the door. We're seeing this in corrections, as well. Regrettably, Pennsylvania has fallen way behind.



For example:

- The Federal Bureau of Prisons initiated a 25% retention bonus in some prisons to keep people on the job.
- Florida now provides a 25% retention and hiring bonus and free tuition for college courses.
- Delaware gives a \$5,000 bonus to new hires and increased pensions to convince current officers to continue their service beyond 20 years.
- Michigan added bonuses up to \$3,000 for new hires, longevity bonuses for current officers and free tuition at all state community colleges.
- Nebraska and Texas now offer tuition assistance.

In comparison, Pennsylvania has not paid any bonuses.

Other states, especially those on our borders or nearby, also outpace us in hourly wages for corrections officers. While Pennsylvania's starting wage is \$21.45 an hour, New York pays \$25.48, Ohio \$22.02 and Virginia \$21.63.

The private sector pays better than our department: An Amazon delivery driver makes \$25 an hour. Sheetz employees can make up to \$28 an hour. Now, an Amazon warehouse worker only make around \$19 an hour, but it's a small difference when you consider the difference between working in a warehouse or in a dangerous prison.

Incidentally, Sheetz has a warehouse in Claysburg, Blair County, which is close to our state correctional institutions in Huntingdon and Smithfield. They pay slightly more for beginning workers at \$21.50 an hour. We see similar situations with Amazon warehouses near prisons in Camp Hill, Phoenix, Mahanoy, Frackville and Coal Township.

As for our benefits, we only fall further behind the competition. A new employee pays 2.5% into PEBTF for their coverage. Dependents costs an additional \$667 a month for the first six months. These add up to a total of approximately \$8,000. After six months, the cost is dropped for dependents, but the initial cost is a non-starter for potential new hires who have choices on where they can work. Also, if a corrections employee is married and their spouse is employed elsewhere, the spouse must maintain their employer provided insurance as their primary source of insurance, regardless of how expensive it is. I don't have to tell you that these regressive policies are clearly playing a role in our staffing crisis.

The solution here is simple: We don't need to be creative. Let's look at what our neighbors are doing and provide the best incentives in the marketplace, raise salaries and bring common sense to the benefits structure.

Mandatory Overtime

With the number of vacancies, mandatory overtime continues to be an issue. In some jails, officers and culinary staff are being mandated to work several times per week. Working so many consecutive shifts in a dangerous work environment takes a mental toll on our members.

You should know our leadership doesn't have this same burden: Lieutenants and captains do not work overtime. When there is a need for these two positions to work overtime, officers and sergeants are offered these positions on a temporary basis. This is known as a TWOC (temporarily working out of class). These TWOC assignments normally last three to six months.

Making matters worse: TWOC assignments take officers away from our active staffing roster, only compounding our staffing issues. For example, at one time SCI Fayette had five corrections officers

assigned as TWOC lieutenants. They were no longer part of the corrections officer complement, on top of the 21 vacancies that already existed.

I say here again, the solution is simple: The department should show leadership and require mid-level supervisors to work overtime and ease the burden on our exhausted officers.

Morale

Simply put, with no end in sight to staffing issues, the department's approach to corrections and the stress that comes with doing a dangerous job, morale remains at an all time low.

Morale is important.

Morale matters.

The perception of members at every jail is that management cares more about inmates than they do about staff members. Often, inmate misconduct is overlooked. During COVID, inmates even received pay increases.

Yet, our members, who put it all on the line every day and worked in some of the most dangerous conditions during a quick-spreading, airborne pandemic, were given nothing.

To this day, our department spends little to no energy ensuring staff are put in positions to thrive, to be successful and, most importantly, to be safe and happy in their work.

Again, the solution is simple: Restore the commitment to holding inmates accountable.

Holding inmates accountable helps them develop self-discipline. This not only helps prepare them for life after prison, but it makes jails safer for everyone. When that happens, employee morale will improve dramatically. What a novel idea! Hold inmates accountable, make jails safer – and morale improves!

Once again, on behalf of the PSCOA, I thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.



John Eckenrode

President

Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association